

Testimony in favor of HB 350

Robin Blazer, Willie's Distillery – Ennis MT

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Chairman Buttrey, Members of the Committee –

I am a founder and owner of Willie's Distillery, in Ennis. We distill and produce several different spirits, such as Montana Moonshine, Montana Honey Moonshine, Bighorn Bourbon, Chokecherry Liqueur, Huckleberry Sweet Cream Liqueur, and various brandies. We have a second whiskey and another liqueur we are set to release soon, and they are fantastic. I encourage you to drop by our tasting room in Ennis sometime and give it all a try! I am also happy to give you ideas on cocktails made with our or other awesome Montana spirits.

Under current Montana statute, I just broke the law. By wearing this shirt with our company logo on it and giving a sales pitch telling you what we do and specifically inviting you to taste it, I have officially 'promoted' my products. That I own. That my staff makes. That I have a vested interest in selling as much as I possibly can. However, if Willie were to stand up here and tell you the same thing he would be well within the bounds of the law and all would be well. Unfortunately, he is in West Yellowstone at an event to promote our products, so I had little choice.

Stay with me here: The difference is that I am not a licensed sales representative for our distillery, but Willie is. And so are two other full time employees of the company – one in Bozeman and one in Missoula. Under current law, we are allowed to have up to three licensed representatives selling and promoting our products across the entire State of Montana.

At the risk of revealing our super-secret and creative marketing strategy, I'm going to tell you how we plan to double last year's sales in the State of Montana: we have a goal to visit IN PERSON every address that has a liquor license. All 2,452 accounts across all 147,000 square miles. We have worked hard to get where we are. We do bartender training, public outreach, assist with on-site events, make dozens of phone calls, send letters, emails, shake a heck of a lot of hands and drive a heck of a lot of miles. In-person tastings with bar staff and public education are the most effective ways to make sure our name is known. With three people covering the entire state, you can see how this can be a bit daunting. We estimate this will take 5-6 years.

This is a good bill, and I sincerely thank Representative Shaw for carrying it for the Distillers Guild. First of all, it allows us the leeway to hire our employees to do what we believe is right for our businesses. Second, it allows us as distillery owners to get off the road a bit more and hire more people so we can do what is most important – running our businesses and making them profitable. Third, I (and my 14 person staff) can finally stop inadvertently breaking the law each time we ask bar staff if we can help them develop an awesome Montana Spirits Cocktail, or when I testify in front of Legislative committees.

Thanks for your time. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.